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ABSTRACT

This study is an evaluation of a cross-section of literature for young adults published in the United States. The books were selected from "Best Books for Young Adults" for the years 1970 to 1990 inclusive. This study shows that when compared to United States census data, there is a disproportionate number of nontraditional family settings in current young adult literature. The number of books with the protagonist living in a two parent family is consistently less than the number of young people actually living in a two parent family based on census evidence. The results should enable librarians to manage their collections to reflect the true societal family structure for their readers. (A table displaying the books included in the study with the type of family represented in each, and a summary of the U.S. census data for the percentage of families with two parents are appended.) (24 references) (Author/MAB)

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ARE TWO PARENT FAMILIES DISPROPORTIONATELY REPRESENTED IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE?

A Master's Research Paper submitted to the
Kent State University School of Library Science
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Master of Library Science

by

Patricia L. Collins

July, 1991

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This study is an evaluation of a cross-section of literature for young adults published in the United States. The books were selected from Best Books for Young Adults for the years 1970 to 1990 inclusive. This study shows that when compared to United States census data, there is a disproportionate number of non-traditional family settings in current young adult literature. The number of books with the protagonist living in a two parent family is consistently less than the number of young people actually living in a two parent family based on census evidence. The results enable librarians to manage their collections to reflect the true societal family structure for their readers.

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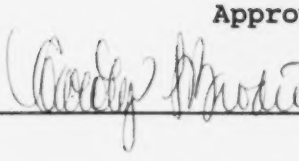
Adviser  Date 7/24/91

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since 1970 the number of one-parent families has been growing. In 1970 there were close to 4 million one-parent families, by 1980 there were almost 7 million. This reflects the increased number of divorces, separations, and parents who have never married. One-parent families accounted for 26 percent of all familiy groups in 1985, this is compared to 13 percent in 1970.[1]

Literature reflects societal change. Children's literature is no exception. In 1973 Tekla K. Bekkedal in her dissertation, showed through content analysis that literature written and published for children did not reflect the changes that were occuring in society and called for the publishers to address this need. At that time literature did not reflect the occurance of one parent families rather the typical family consisted of a mother, a father, two children, a boy and a girl. The mother was a full-time homemaker.[2]

Now, nearly twenty years later, Joyce Burner writes in a recent School Library Journal that the traditional family is being over looked in literature aimed for children and young adults. This article brings to our attention a lack of books being

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[1]Meyer, Jack A. and Rosemary Kern, "Economic and Social Implications of Demographic Change," Demographic Change and the American Future. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1990.

[2]Bekkedal, Tekla K., "Content Analysis of Children's Books." Library Trends (Oct 1973): 111.

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currently published representing two parent families.[3]

This study will analyze a selection of books written for the young adult population. The study will look for the occurrence of two parent families in young adult literature. This data will then be compared with appropriate data from the United States Census.

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[3]Bruner, Joyce. "All in the Family: Parents in Teen Fiction". School Library Journal 35 (Nov 1989): 42.

II. PROBLEM

There is a disproportionate number of books with non-two parent families published for students of junior high through high school age as well as those who have graduated from high school but are still not reading adult books. This situation results in difficulty for librarians in the management of their collections to provide a balance of role model two parent family units for their readers.

This study will analyze a selection of books written for the upper elementary and young adult population, taken from the Best Books for Young Adults published during the years 1971-1990 inclusive. This study will record books with two parent families and compare this data with census reports issued by the United States Census Bureau. This study will show that the number of books with two parent families has decreased in number disproportionately to the actual number of two parent families reported by the United States Census Bureau.

III. BACKGROUND

In her dissertation, "A Study of Contemporary Realistic Fiction for Children the United States since World War II," Tekla Katherine Bekhedal points out that the society portrayed in children's books is not reflective of real society.[1] This content study was done in 1973 and at that time Ms. Bekhedal found that society had not kept pace with changes in contemporary society, but the trend was toward a more realistic representation.

In 1973 Ms. Bekhedal found that though more children lived in urban areas, most of the literature for children was set in a rural environment. Bekhedal found that books having a child protagonist whose parents were divorced, coming from a lower-class family, or being part of a family who moved frequently were not found in the selection of realistic fiction available though society was made of these families. What was available in the literature was not reflected in the United States Census Bureau reports.

Twenty years later, we find articles appearing in current literature that state that today's books for children and young adults do not represent society as it is. Today's society still have the problems aforementioned, but in answering the plea for

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[1]Bekkedal, Tekla Katherine, "A Study of Contemporary Realistic Fiction for Children in the United States since World War II" (Ph. D. Diss., University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, 1972), 208.

books to reflect the non-traditional in society, the book industry again is no longer reflecting society. It has overlooked the traditional family.

In an article written for School Library Journal, November, 1989, Joyce Burner states, "Realistic fiction belongs in the Y. A. collection, so teens will know they aren't alone in their experiences, but they also need literature that offers a positive model to emulate and reinforce the concept that the family is still alive, functioning, and worth the effort to build and maintain."[2]

An article that appeared in Young Children, November, 1989, talks of the "sobering commentary on the troubled state of relations between parents and children found in today's books for children."[3]

The authors of this article conclude that parents are the ultimate providers of emotional involvement their children require, but go on to state that you won't find books with emotional involvement and insight even available for sale at the local bookstores.

Mary Ella Randall asks the question "Don't anybody out there

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[2] Joyce Burner, "All in the Family: Parents in teen Fiction," School Library Journal 35 (November 1989): 42-43.

[3] Paul Fari and Lisa Kehayias-Fari, "The New Children's Books: Grimmer Than Grimm," Young Children (November 1990): 64-65.

have a happy life?"[4] Parents are generally portrayed as unforgivably self-centered in Y.A. realistic fiction. Parents and grandparents die leaving children with nothing due to senseless estate planning. Minority families are portrayed with mothers as irresponsible and father's detached or inebriated.

Randall states, "The teenage reader is being given a self-fulfilling prophesy." Randall challenges writers and publishers to "rise above the formula and speak to the teenage reader in a deferent voice."[5]

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[4]Mary Ella Randall, "Making Disconnections: Wacky Families, treacherous Friendship," English Journal 77 (February 1988): 69-70.

[5]Ibid. 70.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The methodology to be used in this study will be that of content analysis. The books to be analyzed will be taken from the Best Books for Young Adults for the years 1971-1990 inclusive. Every fifth book will be evaluated for family units where children under 18 are living two parents.

The study will compare these data with the data obtained from the United States Census Bureau for the years 1971-1990 reporting family composition.

V. DEFINITIONS

One parent family--Those families that consist of one parent and any number of children under eighteen years of age living together.

Two parent family--Those families that cansist of two adults married to each other and any number of children under eighteen years of age.

No parent family--Those families in which the children do not live with any one who represents a parent to the child.

VI. RESULTS

Expecting to find all two parent families for the ten years 1970 through 1979 it was a surprise to find that just the opposite was the case. The **Best Book List** for the year 1970 had, as expected, all protagonists coming from two parent families. But for the following year, 1971, only 20 percent of the books had the protagonist living in a two parent family. Even more surprising, in the year 1972, there were no books with the protagonist living in a two parent family. In 1973 the percentage of books with the protagonist living in a two parent home jumps to 60 percent and in 1974 the number was up at 80 percent of the protagonists living in two parent homes.

When the above data is compared to the data from the United States Census Bureau statistics on the number of children 18 and under living in two parent families it was not unexpected to find that for the year 1970 there were 85 percent of the children living in two parent families whereas in the literature there were 100 percent of the books having a protagonist living in a two parent family. The continuing trend in society has been that fewer children each year live in two parent families. The decline has been constant over the past twenty years. Unexpectedly the percentage of protagonists living in two parent families widely vacillated the years from 1970 to 1979.

Since 1980 the percentage of protagonists living in two parent families found in the books has been on a more gradual decline. Starting at 60 percent for the year 1980 the percentage dropped as low as 28 percent for 1985. However the great fluctuation that had occurred in the early 1970's is not evident. The United States Census data has shown a gradual decline in the percentage of children under 18 living in two parent families. The current projection of the United States Census Bureau is that 73 percent of today's children 18 and under live in a two parent family. Since 1980, in all cases the number of protagonists living with two parents has been below the Census Bureau data for that year.

VII. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Several things became apparent as the data collection was being conducted. Many of the books on the **Best Books List** were no longer available. This could be accounted for through weeding by the library. This would then assume that the books were no longer circulating, were in need of replacement, or met whatever other criteria the library used for weeding the library's collection. Secondly, the books may no longer be published. This would mean that because books that had been lost or in need of replacement were no longer being published, they could not be replaced. The above finding restricted the choice of books listed on the **Best Books List** in the early 1970's.

This study did show that the number of books that have two parent families is disproportionate to the actual number of young people living in two parent families. The number of books with the protagonist living in a two parent family is consistently less than the number of young people actually living in a two parent family. This conclusion was made after comparing the United States Census data from each year 1970 through 1989 with the corresponding year's percentage of books found to have two parent families.
In the year 1980 76 percent of the children in the United States lived in a two parent family. In that same year, 1980, 60 percent of the protagonists resided in a two parent family. The number of

books with two parent families drops to 28 percent for the years 1985 and 1986, but according to the United States Census Bureau the percentage of youngsters living in two parent families was up at 73 percent for 1985 and 74 percent for the year 1986. See Figure 1.

The books on the 1970 **Best Books List** all had the protagonist living in a two parent family. Unexpectedly 20 percent of the books on the 1971 **Best Books List** had a protagonist living in a two parent family and the 1972 list had 0 percent of the books having the protagonist live within a two parent family. As mentioned earlier, the number of books available from the early 70's was limited either by weeding, attrition, or unavailability from publishers. Another possibility for this unexpected occurrence is that as a response to studies done in the early 1970's showing that there were no books for young people to read that had a non two parent family and that this was not representative of the 20 percent of the young people that were not living in two parent families.[1] This recognition may have resulted in a greater number of books published having the protagonist living in a non two parent family to the point of excess.

In the 1980's articles have brought to our attention that, "Over the past few years we have been inundated with the negative side of

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[1]Bekkedal, Tekla. "Content Analysis of Children's Books". Library Trends (Oct 1973): p. 109-125

contemporary life."[2] This article expresses a concern that non traditional lifestyles are becoming the norm in children's literature.

Society is changing. A article in the June 7, 1991 Austin American Statesman taken from the AP wire service points out that in the year 1990, 73 percent of the nation's children lived in two parent families. In 1970, 85 percent of the children lived in two parent families. Young adult literature is currently publishing books with an average of 50 percent of the books having two parent families. The actual range is from 62 percent in 1978 to 28 percent in 1984. There have not been over 60 percent of the books having two parents in the past ten years.

We should ask ourselves if we are sending the nation's children the message that non two parent families is the norm. Are we assisting in setting a new national norm concerning two parent families through our selection practices, choices available from publishers and weeding. The trend for today is literature based curriculum, are we going to have good literature to use that reflects all kinds of family units in society as it is or are we going to be inadvertently be setting a self fulfilling prophecy.

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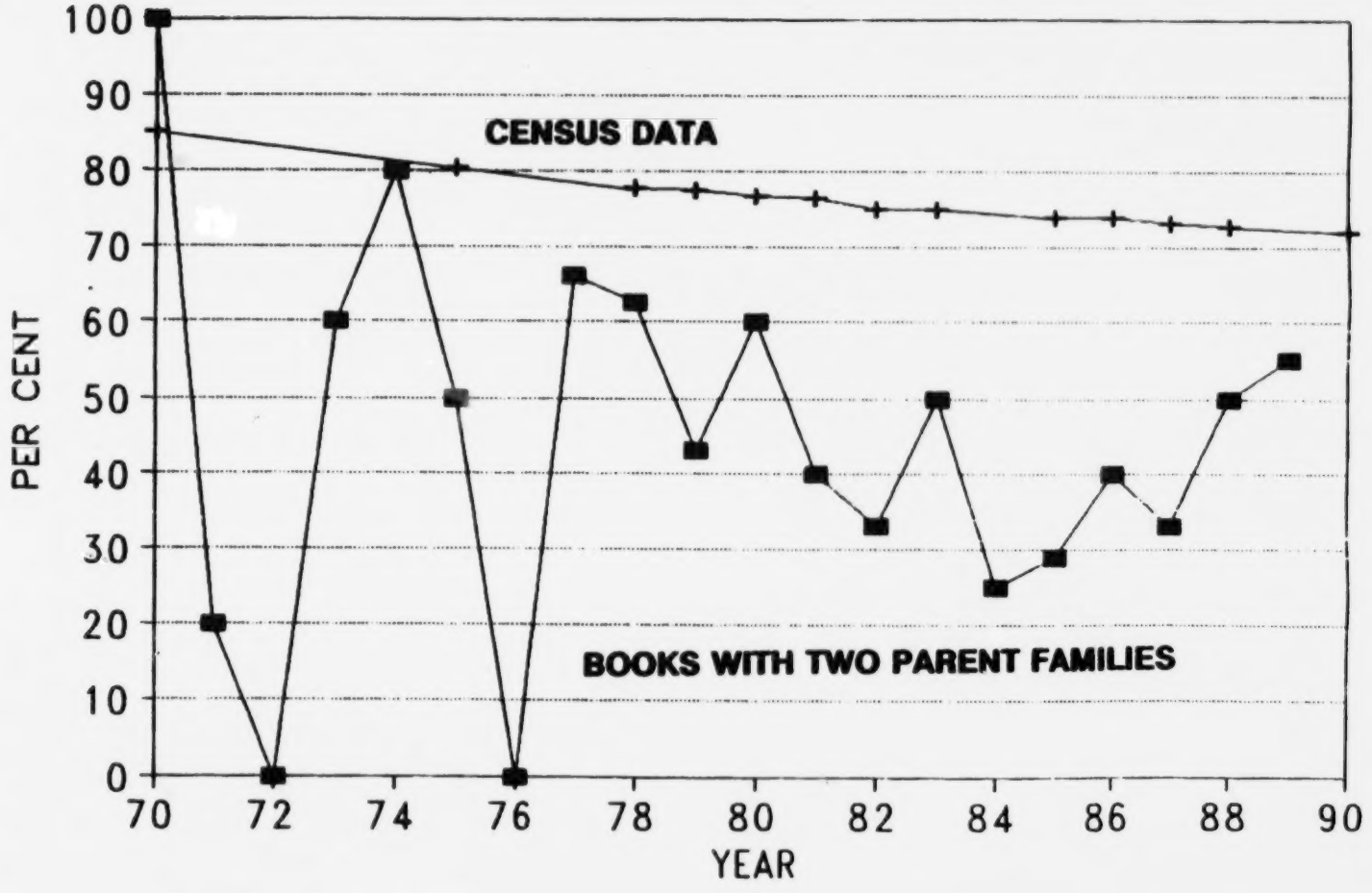
[2]YASD Media Selection and Usage Committee. "Positive Aspects of the Contemporary American Family: A List of Films and Books". Top of the News 40 (Spring 1984): p. 315-319.

FIGURE 1

TWO PARENT FAMILIES–BOOKS, CENSUS DATA



APPENDIX A

BOOK NUMBER	YEAR ON LIST	AUTHOR	TITLE		Y/N
1	1970	Coolidge	Come By Here		1
2		Gregory	Hey, White Girl		1
3		Harris	The Moon in the Cloud		1
4		Ney	Ox Goes North		1
				Average	1
1	1971	Garfield	The Strange Affair of Adelaide Harris		1
2		Hamilton	The Planet of Junior Brown		0
3		Knowles	The Paragon		0
4		Kosinski	Being There		0
5		Nathan	The Elixir		0
				Average	0.2
1	1972	Capps	The True Memoirs of Charley Blankship		0
2		Graham	Cross-fire		0
3		Herbert	Soul Catcher		0
4		Lee	Fog		0
5		Mulvihill	Night of the Axe		0
6		Swarthout	The Tin Lizzie Troop		0
				Average	0

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1	1973	Aldridge	A Sporting Proposition		1
2		Clarke	Rendezvous with Rama		0
3		Freemantle	Goodbye to an Old Friend		1
4		Harris	Hatter Fox		0
5		Schwart-Bart	A Woman Nomad Solitude		1
				Average	0.6
1	1974	Baldwin	If Beale Street Could Talk		1
2		Benchly	Bright Candles		1
3		Ehrlich	The Rein Carnation of Peter Proud		1
4		Fields	A Cry of Angels		0
5		Scoppettone	Trying Hard to Hear You		1
				Average	0.8
1	1975	Cavagnaro	Almost Alone		1
2		Dixon	May I Cross Your Golden River?		0
3		Hotchner	Looking for Miracles		0
4		Lund	Eric		1
5		O'Brien	Z for Zachariah		0
6		Wersba	The Country of the Heart		1
				Average	0.5

1	1976	Bridgers	Home Before Dark		0
2		Bova	The Multiple Man		0
3		Claire	The Otherwise Girl		0
4		Clarke	Imperial Earth		0
5		Guy	Ruby		0
6		Pohl	Man Plus		0
				Average	0

1	1977	Caine	The Cold Room		0
2		Dickinson	Annerton P		1
3		Lowery	A Summer to Die		1
4		Wells	Leave Well Enough Alone		1
				Average	0.75

1	1978	Arrick	Steffie Can't Come Out to Play		0
2		Kerr	Gentlehands		1
3		Levenkron	The Best Little Girl in the World		1
4		Mazer	The War on Villa Street		1
5		Scoppettone	Happy Endings Are all Alike		1
6		Peck	Ghosts I Have Been		0

7		Westall	The Wind Eye		1
8		Wilkinson	Ludell and Willie		0
				Average	0.625
1	1979	Jenkins	A Walk Across America		1
2		Cromier	After the First Death		1
3		Dickinson	Tulku		0
4		Hinton	Tex		0
5		Meyer	A Margaret K. McElderry Book		1
6		Southerland	Let the Lion Eat Straw		0
7		Reed	The Ballad of T. Rantula		0
				Average	0.428571
1	1980	Brancato	Come Alive at 505		1
2		Calvert	The Snowbird		0
3		Christian	Chase Me, Catch nobody		1
4		Pfeffer	About David		0
5		Wells	When No One Was Looking		1
				Average	0.6

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1	1981	Herring	Hub		1
2		Kerr	Little Litte		0
3		Marzollo	Halfway Down Paddy Lane		1
4		Myers	The Legend of Tarik		0
5		Wallin	The Redneck Poacher's Son		0
				Average	0.4

1	1982	Cohen	Seven Daughters and Seven Sons		0
2		Hamilton	Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush		0
3		Litwelyn	The Horse Goddess		1
4		Riley	Only My Mouth Is Smiling		0
5		Reynolds	A String of Chances		1
6		Thomas	Marked By Fire		0
				Average	0.333333

1	1983	Cromier	The Bumblebee Flies Anyway	0
2		Gaan	Little Sister	1
3		Kerr	Me Me Me Me Me	1
4		Lasky	Beyond the Divide	0
5		Paulsen	dancing Carl	1
6		Santiago	Famous all Over Town	1

7		Slepian	The Night of the Bozos		0
8		Tevis	The Queen's Gambit		0
				Average	0.5
1	1984	Bond	A Place to Come back to		0
2		Brooks	The Moves Make the Man		0
3		Highwater	Legend days		0
4		Jones	Archer's Goon		1
5		Magorian	Back Home		0
6		Mahy	The Change Over		0
7		Sleator	Interstellar Pig		1
				Average	0.285714
1	1985	Carter	Wart, Son of Toad		0
2		Dahl	Boy, Tales of Childhood		1
3		Greenbaum	Lovestrong		1
4		Hall	Just One Friend		0
5		McKinley	The Hero and the Crown		0
6		Rodowsky	Julie's Daughter		0
7		Talbert	Dead Birds Singing		0
				Average	0.285714

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1	1986	Bess	Tracks		0
2		Dana	Necessary Parties		0
3		JOnes	The Homeward bounders		1
4		Levoy	Pictures of Adam		1
5		Mazer	When the Phone Rang		0
				Average	0.4

1	1987	Conrad	What I Did for Roman		0
2		Fink	A "Scrap of Time" & Other Stories		1
3		Greenberg	The Far side of Victory		0
4		Korman	A Semester in the Life of a Garbage Bag		1
5		Levitin	The Return		0
6		Mahey	The Tricksters		1
7		Meyer	Denny's Tapes		0
8		Paulsen	The Crossing		0
9		Salassi	Jimmy D., Sidewinder, and Me		0
				Average	0.333333

1	1988	Cromier	Fade		1
2		Deaver	Say Goodnight, Gracie		1
3		Hoover	The Dawn Palace: The Story of Medea		0

4		Koertge	The Arizona Kid		1
5		Mahey	Memory		0
6		Myers	Fallen Angels		0
7		Noonan	McKenzie's Boot		0
8		Renaldi	The Last Silk Dress		1
				Average	0.5

1	1989	Block	Weetzie Bat		0
2		Busselle	Bathing Ugly		1
3		Conrad	My Daniel		1
4		Dickinson	Eva		1
5		Homes	Jack		0
6		Levitin	Silver Days		1
7		Marsden	So Much to Tell YOu		0
8		Nelson	And One For All		1
9		Paulsen	The Voyage of Frog		0
				Average	0.555556

Appendix B

U. S. Census Data

Per Cent of Families with Two Parents

1970	85.2
1971	
1972	
1973	
1974	
1975	80.3
1976	
1977	
1978	77.7
1979	77.4
1980	76.6
1981	76.4
1982	75
1983	74.9
1984	
1985	73.9
1986	73.9
1987	73.1
1988	72.7
1989	
1990	

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